

Jesus and me. And you.

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Who was Jesus? I mean, what really do we know about him? Strip away everything that has been claimed about him, all of it by people who never met him and all of it articles of faith rather than statements of fact, and what do we know for sure? It is an easy question to answer. Nothing. There is virtually nothing we know for sure about the life of Jesus. Can there ever have been a person in human history about whom so little is known as fact, and yet about whom so much has been claimed as faith?

There are those who say that, given that we know so little, it is more reasonable to suppose that actually he never existed at all, that he is the product of fancy and fabrication by those who came along a long time later and who had their own particular agenda to promote. That requires more of a leap of denial rather than any leap of faith in believing in the historical fact that there was such a person as Jesus, about whom we know so little.

All four of the gospels which were included in the Christian canon, a decision made for theological and political reasons several hundred years after Jesus is believed to have lived, by bishops and other churchmen who wanted to present a very particular point of view, were written a long time after Jesus had died. Scholars agree that Mark was the first to be written, probably around the year 65 CE, a generation later. It is believed that Matthew and Luke were probably written about the same time as each other, perhaps around 90 CE. And John? John is not like the other three, it is more a sermon than a gospel, and most likely written around 120 CE. That is almost a century after Jesus had lived and taught.

There is only one other reference to Jesus. The historian Josephus makes a passing reference to someone who most likely was Jesus, but says little more than that there was such a fellow teaching and preaching and causing trouble. And that is it. Nothing else.

Now, imagine this. Imagine an event that happened a hundred years ago. There is such an event the centenary of which we will soon be observing – the beginning of the first world war. Now, at least we know that that did actually happen, but suppose your great, great grandfather was a soldier in that war. And when he returned from the trenches of Flanders and France, he told his friends about some of his experiences in that horror. He never wrote anything down. He told his stories over a pint, and not as a chronological record of events but as episodes, isolated incidents, things he recalled, images which

had seared themselves into his memory. And then when his friends were having a pint with others, those others recounted what they had heard, and they then told their friends, and so it went on. Nobody ever wrote anything down until, say, the nineteen sixties when someone had the bright idea of assembling these stories and anecdotes and memories into some kind of coherent narrative. They had this bright idea because they had decided that your great, great grandfather must have been not just a soldier but a hero to have done what he had done. Fought selflessly for a cause greater than himself. Endured terrible hardship and privation. Been willing to sacrifice his own life that others might live and live better than they might have done otherwise. The motivation to write all this down was sparked not by the desire to tell a story objectively and factually, but to portray someone in a particular way. As such, certain things are highlighted, others ignored. The ordering of events would have a structure, a direction, a theme to convey your great, great grandfather as a real hero.

And as for dialogue, do you suppose that anything which was written down as part of this story, written fifty or more years after they had been said, and having been orally relayed through numerous retellings, do you suppose that any of the dialogue would be word-perfect transcripts of what was actually said. Could any of you write down exactly what you said in a conversation even yesterday, let alone what someone else had said a hundred years ago and which you had never directly heard?

And yet, here we have four gospels, and precious little else, which tell us all we can know about Jesus and who he was, what he taught, how he lived and how he died. All of them written long after Jesus had died, by people who had never met him, who were relying on stories passed down orally through the decades, and who had no intention of writing a factual account about Jesus but were writing a powerful polemic to persuade people that Jesus had in fact been not a normal person, not even a hero, but God!

During the nineteenth century, there grew a fashion amongst Biblical scholars, German scholars particularly, to attempt to write a Life of Jesus. Using all four gospels they tried to mesh the various stories and episodes reported therein into a coherent biography of Jesus life, charting his course from birth to childhood to his adult ministry and finally his death. Many attempted it, with varying degrees of plausibility, until at the end of the century Albert Schweitzer wrote a compelling book, *The Search for the Historical Jesus*, in which having reviewed all of these attempts he concluded, "Guys, give it up. It is impossible. The historical Jesus is lost to us. Unless some new evidence comes up, we can never know. Jesus now is a man of faith, not fact.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Biblical criticism, again led by German theologians, adopted a more nuanced approach to the Bible. Instead of assuming that the Bible had somehow fallen from the sky, the complete and unchallengeable word of God miraculously written in our native tongue and every word true, these scholars looked at the historical and social contexts, they analysed the stories as literature, written by men who had their own agendas. In more recent years there has been The Jesus Seminar, in which scholars have assessed each of the reported sayings of Jesus and speculated on their likely authenticity.

And, for all of that scholarship and as welcome and as helpful as it is, Jesus remains a figure of faith, and what is most important is not how much of the stories and sayings are “true”, but how we relate to them. How do they impact and influence us in our attempts, today, to be faithful.

In other words, the real question is not who was Jesus in real life two thousand years ago, but who Jesus is in your life now. Who is Jesus to you?

Given that the only way to discover who Jesus might be in your life is to be found in the gospels, and given all the doubts and uncertainties regarding the veracity and accuracy of those scant sources, I have to say that I marvel at the answers some people discover for themselves. I have to wonder, are they reading the same sources that I am? Or are they overlaying so much of their own cultural stuff, their need to use Jesus for their own purposes, that they have lost all sight of what lies in the texts. Or perhaps it is I who is guilty of projecting my own cultural and religious stuff onto Jesus. Who knows? Perhaps each and all of us read into the scriptures what we want to read, and conveniently ignore the rest.

But, if I try to peel away the accretions of the millennia and everything which has been said and claimed about Jesus, though I choose not to call myself a Christian, I still find him to be a compelling figure, more compelling for me than any other spiritual teacher. Conservative Christians often use the acronym, WWJD. What would Jesus do? It is a question I find helpful. If I want to learn the challenging spiritual art of forgiveness, I turn to his example. If I want to understand the nature of the radical inclusivity of love, who better to turn to? If I want an example of faithfulness even unto death, is there a more powerful example?

This is the Jesus who stands out for me and who speaks to me.

He is a man of conviction and courage. He is not afraid to speak his truth, usually in love but sometimes in anger, regardless of how well others might receive his words and regardless of the consequences to himself.

He is a man of compassion, who is not bothered with imposed religious conventions when they mask the personal realities in a situation. He wants to be in real relationship with his God and how that God is manifest in the world and in people's lives, not with rules and forms and ritualised pieties.

He is a man who cares not for distinctions between men and women, Jew and Gentile, native and foreigner, gay and straight. The next time you encounter a Christian using their scripture based faith to justify the virulence of their hatred towards gays, tell them that you agree with everything Jesus said condemning homosexuality. Which, you guessed it, is precisely nothing. Indeed, in John's gospel there are frequent references to him "lying down with the disciple he loved" which it is not unreasonable to suppose might be allusions to a same-sex relationship. There is only one thing which Jesus repeatedly condemns and warns against. Money. Hands up those of you with a mortgage, or a bank account, or a pension plan, or even two coats when others have none. Hands up if you would be unwilling to give it all away. Not some, but all of it. Come on, hands up. Well, you are all going to burn. But don't worry. I will be turning to toast right alongside of you.

He is a man who is counter to the establishment but who identifies himself with what he is for rather than what he is against, whose message is of inclusive love rather than excluding hate.

He is a man who is serene in the face of danger, who behaves with honour when in the company of rogues, who speaks his truth even when to do so invites ridicule or worse.

He is a man, a human in whose life shines the light of the divine. A man no more God than you or me, but who, more than you or me, was aware of and in touch with the divinity within him even as we might learn to be aware of and in touch with the divinity within us. He was awake to his divinity, while most of us slumber.

Most of what the church teaches about Jesus I find positively unhelpful. You will all have seen the plaques on many churches which proclaim “Jesus, Worship Him Here”. That is the most heretical and idolatrous statement imaginable, one which Jesus would be the very first to denounce. He wanted people to worship God, not him. Frequently in the gospels he implicitly and explicitly chastises those who tried to deify him. Don’t worship me, worship God!

I do not always find it easy to penetrate many of the teachings of mainstream Christian churches, they are often a barrier through which I cannot pass. But when I do pass through that barrier, I find a man whose clarity of voice speaks directly to my heart and spirit.

I do not call myself a Christian, because I cannot accept what the Christian church demands in belief about Jesus, namely that it is through him and him alone that the way of wholeness is to be found because he was God incarnate who died exclusively for our sins of those who profess belief in him. Others are able to believe that. I am not. I find those beliefs not only intellectual untenable but ethically indefensible and counter to my experience of the world in which people of different faiths and of none are amongst the finest exemplars of humanity. The beliefs about Jesus having been God I dismiss. But I am happy to say that in the person of Jesus, I find a man whose spiritual path I would follow to my great spiritual benefit. What would Jesus do? I would hope I might do the same.

And you? Who is your Jesus?